Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED
MAY 24 1999
CLERK

(2)

No. 98-1535

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

EDWARD WAGNER,

Petitioner,

v.

CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH, *et al.*,

Respondents.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit

RESPONDENTS' BRIEF IN OPPOSITION

PATRICK N. BROWN
City Attorney
Counsel of Record
CLAUDIA M. MCKENNA
Deputy City Attorney
MAYRA RIVERA-DELGADO
Assistant City Attorney
CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH
Attorneys for Respondents
200 Second Street
West Palm Beach, FL 33401
(561) 659-8017

153120

Counsel Press LLC
FORMERLY LUTZ APPELLATE SERVICES
(800) 274-3321 • (800) 359-6859

41 pp

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Table of Cited Authorities	iii
Table of Appendices	v
Statement of the Case	1
A. Background	1
B. Proceedings Before the District Court	2
C. Appeal Before The United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit	3
Reasons for Denying the Writ	4
I. The Petition For Writ Of Certiorari Should Be Denied Because There Are No Compelling Reasons For Granting Review As Required By Supreme Court Rule 10	4
A. The Eleventh Circuit Did Not Enter A Decision In Conflict With The Decision Of Another United States Court of Appeals On The Same Important Matter	4
B. The Eleventh Circuit Did Not Decide An Important Question Of Law That Has Not Been, But Should Be, Settled By This Court	5

Contents

Page

C. The Rules Of Law Regarding Law Enforcement Employees' First Amendment Protection Have Already Been Properly Stated By This Court .. 7

D. The Rules Regarding Qualified Immunity Have Already Been Properly Stated By This Court 10

II. The Petition For Writ Of Certiorari Should Be Denied Because Even Assuming Petitioner's Grounds As True, The Respondents Would Still Prevail 11

A. Whether or Not Petitioner Communicated The Relevant Speech In Public Is Not Dispositive Of The Case At Bar 11

B. Whether or Not Speech Concerning Workplace Safety May Be Considered A Matter Of Public Concern Is Not Dispositive Of The Case At Bar 15

Conclusion 18

TABLE OF CITED AUTHORITIES

Page

Cases:

Anderson v. Creighton, 483 U.S. 635 (1987) 10

Board of County Commissioners v. Umberh, 518 U.S. 668 (1996) 8, 12

Campbell v. Arkansas Department of Correction, 155 F.3d 950 (8th Cir. 1998) 15, 16, 17

Connick v. Meyers, 461 U.S. 138 (1983) .. 7, 8, 9, 12, 16

Givhan v. Western Line Consolidated School District, 439 U.S. 410 (1979) 8, 12

Harlow v. Fitzgerald, 457 U.S. 800 (1982) 7, 10

Johnson v. Jones, __ U.S. __, 115 S. Ct. 2151 (1982) 10

Kelley v. Johnson, 425 U.S. 238 (1978) 9

Mt. Healthy City Board of Educ. v. Doyle, 429 U.S. 274 (1977) 8, 12

Perry v. Synderman, 408 U.S. 593 (1972) 8, 12

Pickering v. Board of Education, 391 U.S. 563 (1968) 2, 3, 7, 8, 9

Cited Authorities

Page

Rankin v. McPherson, 107 S. Ct. 2891 (1987) 7, 8

Sommerville v. United States, 376 U.S. 909 (1964) 4

United States v. National Treasury Employees Union, 513 U.S. 454 (1995) 8, 12

Waters v. Churchill, 511 U.S. 661 (1994) 8, 12

Statute:

42 U.S.C. § 1983 ..... 2, 3

United States Constitution:

First Amendment 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17

Rule:

United States Supreme Court Rule 10 .. 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 17

Other Authority:

Stern, Gressman, Shapiro & Geller, *Supreme Court Practice*, Seventh Edition 4

TABLE OF APPENDICES

Page

Appendix A — Opinion Of The United States Court Of Appeals For The Eleventh Circuit Dated And Filed October 29, 1998 ..... 1a

Appendix B — Order Of The United States District Court For The Southern District Of Florida Granting Defendants' Motion For Summary Judgment Dated And Filed September 24, 1997 ..... 6a

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Background

Petitioner, Edward Wagner ("Petitioner") is a law enforcement officer currently employed with the City of West Palm Beach Police Department ("City"). In June of 1988, the Petitioner suffered a neck injury in a car accident. Subsequently, in October of 1989, Petitioner was assigned to the City's S.W.A.T. Team. On or about May 13, 1993, Petitioner sent a letter to the S.W.A.T. Team captain voicing his concerns that the S.W.A.T. Team had practiced in a building allegedly contaminated by asbestos.

On June 14, 1993, Petitioner was notified by Respondent Ric L. Bradshaw, then Assistant Chief of Police and Commander of S.W.A.T. operations ("Bradshaw"), that he was being removed from his assignment in the S.W.A.T. Team because the Petitioner was having problems associated with his neck condition, which could result in harm to the Petitioner and others. Bradshaw also stated that Petitioner's statements regarding his concern for asbestos had caused Bradshaw to be concerned about exposing Petitioner to areas that may have adverse hazardous materials. Bradshaw further stated in his memorandum that Petitioner could reapply for an assignment in the S.W.A.T. Team when he had corrected his existing health problems. The Petitioner continues to be employed as a law enforcement officer with the City.

B. Proceedings Before the District Court

Petitioner filed a complaint against the City, Bradshaw and Billy Riggs, then Chief of Police, alleging that his transfer from the SWAT Team was in violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, § 1983 (First Amendment) and the Florida Constitution. The City moved for summary judgment on all counts. The district court granted the City's motion summary judgment on all counts, and judgment was entered accordingly. (Appendix B).

Regarding Petitioner's First Amendment claim under § 1983, the district court found as follows: (a) as to the claim for injunctive relief and Bradshaw in his official capacity, for which qualified immunity is not available, the court skipped the first prong of the *Pickering* test and found that "[e]ven assuming" that Petitioner's speech was a matter of public concern, the Petitioner failed to meet the second prong of the *Pickering* standard because the City's interest in promoting the efficient functioning of the City's S.W.A.T. Team outweighs Petitioner's First Amendment interests (Appendix B, 15a-16a)[1]; and (b) as to Respondent Bradshaw in his individual capacity, Bradshaw was entitled to qualified immunity because it was not clearly established at the time of Petitioner's speech that it was unconstitutional

---

1. In the Petition for Certiorari, Petitioner incorrectly states that the district court "concluded" that Petitioners' speech "touched on matters of public concern." *See* Petition for Writ of Certiorari, page 2. However, the Petitioner has misstated the district court's finding. The district court did not make any finding regarding whether or not the speech involved was a matter of public concern. Rather, the district court found that even assuming that Petitioner's speech was a matter of public concern, the Petitioner failed to meet the second prong of the test. (Appendix B, 15a-16a).

to transfer a S.W.A.T. team member for voicing concerns about safety. (Appendix B, 14a).

C. Appeal Before The United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit

Subsequently, Petitioner filed a partial appeal only with respect to the dismissal of his First Amendment claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Eleventh Circuit found that: (a) as to the claim for injunctive relief and against Bradshaw in his official capacity, for which qualified immunity is not available, the Petitioner failed to meet the first prong of the *Pickering* standard because Petitioner's speech did not involve a matter of public concern, and as such, it was unnecessary to reach the second prong of the test (Appendix A, 3a-4a); and (b) as to Respondent Bradshaw in his individual capacity, Bradshaw was entitled to qualified immunity because Petitioner's speech "does not involve a matter of public concern," and as such, Petitioner "failed to establish a violation of a constitutional right at all," and therefore it is not necessary to "reach the question of whether any right allegedly violated was "clearly established." (Appendix A, 5a).[2]

---

2. In the Petition for Certiorari, Petitioner incorrectly states that the Eleventh Circuit "disagreed" with the district court's assumption that Petitioners' speech involved a matter of public concern." *See* Petition for Writ of Certiorari, page 2. Just as the Petitioner misstated the district court's findings, the Petitioner here misstates the Eleventh Circuit's findings. Rather than assuming compliance with the first prong of the *Pickering* standard, the Eleventh Circuit found that Petitioner's speech did not involve a matter of public concern, rendering the analysis of the second prong of the test moot. (Appendix A, 3a-4a).

REASONS FOR DENYING THE WRIT

I.

THE PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI SHOULD BE DENIED BECAUSE THERE ARE NO COMPELLING REASONS FOR GRANTING REVIEW AS REQUIRED BY SUPREME COURT RULE 10

A. The Eleventh Circuit Did Not Enter A Decision In Conflict With The Decision Of Another United States Court of Appeals On The Same Important Matter

Supreme Court Rule 10 provides that review on certiorari will be granted "only for compelling reasons." *Id.* Subpart (a) provides that certiorari review of a decision of a United States Court of Appeals may be considered when:

> (a) a United States court of appeals has entered a decision in conflict with the decision of another United States court of appeals on the same important matter . . .

Id. For purposes of Rule 10, a conflict must be a real or "intolerable" conflict on the same matter of law or fact, not merely an inconsistency in dicta or in general principles utilized. Stern, Gressman, Shapiro & Geller, *Supreme Court Practice*, Seventh Edition, page 167. Further, if resolution of an alleged "clear conflict" would have no bearing upon the ultimate outcome of the case before the Court, certiorari review should be denied. *See, e.g., Sommerville v. United States*, 376 U.S. 909 (1964).

In his Petition for Writ of Certiorari, the Petitioner has failed to cite any decision of any United States court of appeals in conflict with the decision of the Eleventh Circuit in this matter.[3] In particular, the Petitioner has failed to cite a case from another United States court of appeals, or from any other jurisdiction where it is alleged that a police department, or any other quasi-military agency, allegedly transferred an officer because of speech similar to the one in the case at bar; nor has Petitioner cited a case where a court has found that speech by a police officer similar to the speech alleged in this case involved a matter of public concern; nor does Petitioner rely on a case where a court has found that speech by a police officer similar to the speech alleged in this case is protected by the First Amendment, thereby making necessary an analysis of whether this right was "clearly established"; nor has Petitioner identified a case where a court has found that in June 1993, it was clearly established that it was unconstitutional to transfer a S.W.A.T. Team member for voicing concerns about safety. In sum, the Petitioner has failed to point to any decision by a United States court of appeals in conflict with the Eleventh Circuit's decision in this case on the same important matter. Accordingly, the Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied.

B. The Eleventh Circuit Did Not Decide An Important Question Of Law That Has Not Been, But Should Be, Settled By This Court

As previously stated, Supreme Court Rule 10 provides that review on certiorari will be granted "only for compelling

3. As more fully set forth in Part II.B below, the Petitioner makes general references in his argument to alleged conflicts between circuit courts. Even assuming the existence of these conflicts, certiorari should be denied because the alleged conflicts referred to by Petitioner have no bearing upon the ultimate outcome of the case before the Court.

reasons." *Id.* Rule 10 further provides for the denial of certiorari review "when the asserted error consists of . . . the misapplication of a properly stated rule of law." *Id.* Subpart (c) provides that certiorari review of a decision of a United States Court of Appeals may be considered when:

> (c) . . . a United States court of appeals has decided an important question of federal law that has not been, but should be, settled by this Court . . .

Id.

In the Petition for Writ of Certiorari, the Petitioner does not specify under which Subpart of Rule 10 he proposes that certiorari review should be granted. The Petitioner merely argues that the courts below erred and misapplied the law in this case. Both the district court and the Eleventh Circuit correctly applied the law to the facts in this case. Nevertheless, even assuming that, as Petitioner argues, the courts below misapplied the law to the facts in this case, certiorari review should be denied because the rules of law applicable in this case have already been well established by this Court.

As stated above, Rule 10 provides that certiorari review should be denied "when the asserted error consists of . . . the misapplication of a properly stated rule of law." *Id.* Therefore, regardless of the merits of Petitioner's argument, certiorari review should be denied pursuant to Rule 10 because the applicable rule of law in this case is already well settled. In particular, as more fully set forth below, the opinions of the courts below were based upon an interpretation of the rules set forth by this Court regarding law enforcement employees'

First Amendment protection in *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563 (1968), and subsequent cases, as well the rules applicable to qualified immunity set forth by this Court in *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 800, 818 (1982), and its progeny.

C. The Rules Of Law Regarding Law Enforcement Employees' First Amendment Protection Have Already Been Properly Stated By This Court

For over 31 years, public employees' First Amendment rights have been well settled. This Court stated in *Connick v. Meyers*, 461 U.S. 138, 140 (1983):

> For at least 15 years it has been settled that a state cannot condition public employment on a basis that infringes the employee's constitutionally protected interest in freedom of speech. *Id.*, citing *Branti v. Finkel*, 445 U.S. 507, 515-6 (1980); *Perry v. Synderman*, 408 U.S. 593, 597 (1972). *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1968); *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967).

A determination of whether a public employer has improperly sanctioned an employee on the basis of the employee's speech requires "a balance between the interest of the [employee], as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern and the interest of the State, as an employer, in promoting the efficiency of the public services it performs through its employees." *Rankin v. McPherson*,

107 S. Ct. 2891, 2896 (1987) (quoting *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1968)); *Connick v. Meyers*, 461 U.S. 138, 140 (1983).

Whether the employee's speech involves a matter of public concern is determined by considering the "content, form, and context of a given statement" *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 147. Factors a court should use in making this determination include: (1) whether the expression relates "to any matter of political, social, or other concern to the community," or merely to "matters only of personal interest;" and (2) whether the employee attempted to have the subject of his or her expression aired in a public forum. *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 146-8; *see Board of County Commissioners v. Umberh*, 518 U.S. 668, 674-5 (1996); *United States v. National Treasury Employees Union*, 513 U.S. 454, 465-467 (1995); *Waters v. Churchill*, 511 U.S. 661, 668 (1994).

Moreover, absent extraordinary circumstances, First Amendment protection remains unavailable when "a public employee speaks not as a citizen upon matters of public concern, but instead as an employee upon matters only of personal interest . . ." *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 147. The fact that the speech in question occurred in a private context does not necessarily signify that the speech is of private rather than public concern. *See Givhan v. Western Line Consolidated School District*, 439 U.S. 410, 415-16 (1979); *Mt. Healthy City Board of Educ. v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274 (1977); *Perry v. Synderman*, 408 U.S. 593 (1972).

> Private expressions may in some situations bring additional factors to the *Pickering* calculus. When a government employee personally

> confronts his immediate supervisor, the employing agency's institutional efficiency may be threatened not only by the content of the employee's message but also by the manner, time and place in which it is delivered.

Connick, 461 U.S. at 152-3. Additionally, this Court has established that law enforcement employees are entitled to less protection under the First Amendment than other professions. *Kelley v. Johnson*, 425 U.S. 238, 245-46 (1978).

In the case at bar, both the district court, as well as the Eleventh Circuit, applied well settled rules of law when making their determinations regarding First Amendment rights of law enforcement officers. The district court found that "[e]ven assuming" that Petitioner's speech was a matter of public concern, the Petitioner failed to meet the second prong of the *Pickering* standard because the City's interest in promoting the efficient functioning of the City's S.W.A.T. Team outweighs Petitioner's First Amendment interests. (Appendix B, 15a-16a). The Eleventh Circuit found that the Petitioner failed to meet the first prong of the *Pickering* standard because Petitioner's speech did not involve a matter of public concern, and as such, it was unnecessary to reach the second prong of the test. (Appendix A, 3a-4a). Therefore, it follows from the language in the written opinions issued by the courts below that when making their determination, both courts applied law that has been clearly established law when making their determinations regarding First Amendment rights of law enforcement officers. As such, certiorari review in this case would only result in the re-statement of well settled law, which is contrary to the provisions of Rule 10. Therefore, the Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied.

D. The Rules Regarding Qualified Immunity Have Already Been Properly Stated By This Court

It is well settled that "[p]ublic officials are entitled to qualified immunity from liability for civil damages insofar as their conduct does not violate clearly established constitutional rights." *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 800, 818 (1982); *Anderson v. Creighton*, 483 U.S. 635 (1987); *Johnson v. Jones*, __ U.S. __, 115 S. Ct. 2151, 2153-4 (1982) (analyzing qualified immunity in the context of summary judgment). To be established clearly, a right must be so particularized that "in the light of pre-existing law the unlawfulness must be apparent." *Anderson*, 483 U.S. at 640 (1987). "The contours of the right must be sufficiently clear that a reasonable official would understand what he is doing violates that right." *Anderson*, 483 U.S. at 640.

In the case at bar, both the district court, as well as the Eleventh Circuit, applied well settled rules of law regarding qualified immunity of law enforcement officers. The district court found that as to Respondent Bradshaw in his individual capacity, Bradshaw was entitled to qualified immunity because it was not clearly established at the time of Petitioner's speech that it was unconstitutional to transfer a S.W.A.T. team member for voicing concerns about safety. (Appendix B, 14a). The Eleventh Circuit found that as to Respondent Bradshaw in his individual capacity, Bradshaw was entitled to qualified immunity because Petitioner's speech "does not involve a matter of public concern," and as such, Petitioner "failed to establish a violation of a constitutional right at all," and therefore it is not necessary to "reach the question of whether any right allegedly violated was clearly established." (Appendix A, 5a). Accordingly, when making their determination, both courts

applied well settled rules of law regarding qualified immunity of law enforcement officers. As such, certiorari review in this case would only result in the re-statement of well settled law, which is contrary to the provisions of Rule 10. Therefore, the Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied.

II.

THE PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI SHOULD BE DENIED BECAUSE EVEN ASSUMING PETITIONER'S GROUNDS AS TRUE, THE RESPONDENTS WOULD STILL PREVAIL

In the Petition, the Petitioner asserts two reasons for granting the petition, as follows: (1) speech need not be conveyed to the public to touch on matters of public concern (Petition for Writ of Certiorari, page 4); and (2) speech concerning workplace safety is a matter of public concern (Petition for Writ of Certiorari, page 9). However, certiorari should be denied because as more fully set forth below, even assuming for purposes of this argument that the above grounds were correct, the Respondents would have still prevailed in the courts below because these grounds are not dispositive of the issues in this case.

A. Whether or Not Petitioner Communicated The Relevant Speech In Public Is Not Dispositive Of The Case At Bar

As his first ground, the Petitioner asserts that speech need not be conveyed to the public to touch on matters of

public concern (Petition for Writ of Certiorari, page 4). The Respondents do not contest this assertion. This Court has stated that under certain circumstances, private speech may touch on matters of public concern. As previously noted in Part I.C above, the fact that the speech in question occurred in a private context does not necessarily signify that the speech is of private rather than public concern. *See Givhan v. Western Line Consolidated School District*, 439 U.S. 410, 415-16 (1979); *Mt. Healthy City Board of Educ. v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274 (1977); *Perry v. Synderman*, 408 U.S. 593 (1972).

Nevertheless, whether the employee's speech involves a matter of public concern is determined by considering the "content, form, and context of a given statement" *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 147. Among the factors that a court should use in making this determination, this Court has included: (1) whether the expression relates "to any matter of political, social, or other concern to the community," or merely to "matters only of personal interest; and (2) whether the employee attempted to have the subject of his or her expression aired in a public forum. *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 146-8; *see Board of County Commissioners v. Umberh*, 518 U.S. 668, 674-5 (1996); *United States v. National Treasury Employees Union*, 513 U.S. 454, 465-467 (1995); *Waters v. Churchill*, 511 U.S. 661, 668 (1994). Moreover, absent extraordinary circumstances, First Amendment protection remains unavailable when "a public employee speaks not as a citizen upon matters of public concern, but instead as an employee upon matters only of personal interest . . ." *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 147.

While the fact that the speech in question occurred in a private context does not necessarily mean that the speech

is of private rather than public concern, courts may consider whether the employee attempted to convey the speech to the public. Thus, the Petitioner incorrectly asserts that the Eleventh Circuit erred in considering this factor when making its determination.

Further, while the Eleventh Circuit did consider the fact that the speech in question occurred in a private context, the court, however, did not rely on this factor exclusively, nor did the court stated that this factor was dispositive. Rather, the Eleventh Circuit gave great weigh to other factors, and in particular, the motivations behind Petitioner's speech. The Eleventh Circuit stated as follows:

> [W]e hold that Wagner failed to meet the threshold requirement by showing that his speech involved a matter of public concern. To fall within the realm of public concern, an employee's speech must relate to a matter of political, social or other concern to the community . . . First Amendment protection is not available when the employee speaks upon matters only of personal interest. In determining whether the employee spoke on behalf of the public or simply as an employee on behalf of himself, the court may consider the employee's attempts to make the concerns public along with the employee's motivation in speaking. In the instant case, Wagner alleges that the department's decision to remove him from the S.W.A.T. Team was retaliation for having voiced concerns in a letter to the Team Captain. The letter is the only means by which Wagner voiced

> his concerns; he made no effort to communicate the contents of the letter to the public. *Further, the language used in the letter suggests that Wagner's motivation in speaking was personal; Wagner did not purport to speak on anyone's behalf and in no way drew the public at large or its concerns into the picture . . . At most, Wagner's speech voiced the safety interests of the other S.W.A.T. Team members. Wagner did not contend that a large segment of society was at risk, or even that other members of the community, outside the S.W.A.T. Team, faced potential health risks. Because Wagner's speech was primarily in furtherance of his private interests, it does not constitute a matter of public concern.*

(Appendix A, 4a-5a, emphasis added, citations omitted). The Eleventh Circuit properly considered communication through private means as a factor. Petitioner's assertion that such consideration constitutes error lacks merit because this Court has already stated that this factor may be considered. Further, since the Eleventh Circuit considered other factors and did not rely on this factor exclusively, nor gave it any greater weigh, Petitioners would still have prevailed even in the absence of the court's consideration of this factor.

Further, the Petitioner incorrectly asserts that there is a conflict among United States circuit courts regarding whether privately communicated speech may be considered a matter of public concern. Petitioner cites cases where courts have found privately communicated speech as touching upon matters of public concern, as well as cases where courts have found that such speech does not involve

matters of public concern. Simply put, United States circuit courts are not in conflict regarding this matter. Moreover, even assuming for purposes of this argument that conflict among the circuit courts does exist, certiorari review would not be warranted because, as explained above, the applicable rule of law on this matter has already been well settled by this Court.

As previously established by this Court, while the fact that the speech in question occurred in a private context does not necessarily signify that the speech is of private rather than public concern, courts are allowed to consider this factor when evaluating whether the speech involves a matter of public concern. It follows logically from this rule that there will be cases in which privately communicated speech will be found to involve matters of public concern, as well as cases where the finding will be contrary. The Petitioner incorrectly portrays this result as a conflict. There is no conflict between circuits regarding this issue, and certiorari review should be denied.

B. Whether or Not Speech Concerning Workplace Safety May Be Considered A Matter Of Public Concern Is Not Dispositive Of The Case At Bar

Finally, the Petitioner asserts that speech concerning workplace safety is a matter of public concern. Plaintiff alleges that in this regard, the Eleventh Circuit is in conflict with a decision of the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in *Campbell v. Arkansas Department of Correction*, 155 F.3d 950 (8th Cir. 1998). In *Campbell* a prison warden was demoted after complaining about the prison's unsafe conditions, in particular, its lack of security. The warden requested adjustment to cell doors and other

measures to improve security. The Eighth Circuit found that the warden's communication "addressed the safety of prison employees and the surrounding community," and that "these are all matters well beyond the procedural technicalities of prison administration or personnel matters of particular concern to him as an individual." *Id.* 958.

The Respondent does not dispute that a communication involving workplace safety may, under certain circumstances, touch upon a matter of public concern. As previously explained, whether the employee's speech involves a matter of public concern is a determination made on a case-by-case basis by considering the "content, form, and context of a given statement" *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 147. This does not mean, however, that all speech regarding workplace safety is automatically considered a matter of public concern.

In *Campbell* the Eighth Circuit found that the warden's communication regarding the prison's poor security system addressed issues regarding the safety of the surrounding community. The court's conclusion in *Campbell* does not represent a conflict with the case at bar. The Eighth Circuit reasonably concluded that a prison's poor security system and dysfunctional cell locks may affect the safety, not only of the complaining employee, but also of the surrounding community. The speech involved in *Campbell*, is, however, clearly distinguishable from the case at bar where the Petitioner's complaint is limited to training in a building allegedly contaminated with asbestos. Petitioner's complaint does not affect the security of any particular sector of the community, or the society at large.

Further, the language in *Campbell* clearly reflects that the finding of the court was based upon the particular circumstances of the case. There is no language in the opinion which suggests that the Eighth Circuit intended to create a rule that all complaints regarding workplace safety are automatically deemed to involve public concern. While speech regarding workplace safety may, under certain circumstances, touch upon matters of public concerns, it does not follow that all speech involving workplace safety necessarily involves a matter of public concern. As such, the Eighth Circuit's decision in *Campbell* is not in conflict with the Eleventh Circuit's decision in the case at bar. Accordingly, the Petition for a Writ of Certiorari should be denied.

* * *

In summary, the Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied because there are no compelling reasons for granting review, as required by Supreme Court Rule 10. The Eleventh Circuit did not enter a decision in conflict with the decision of another United States court of appeals on the same important matter. The Eleventh Circuit did not decide an important question of law that has not been, but should be, settled by this court. The rules of law regarding a law enforcement employee's First Amendment protection, as well as qualified immunity, have already been properly stated by this Court. Moreover, even by treating Petitioner's asserted grounds as true, the Respondents would have still have prevailed in the courts below.

CONCLUSION

The petition for writ of certiorari should be denied.

Respectfully submitted,

PATRICK N. BROWN
City Attorney
Counsel of Record
CLAUDIA M. MCKENNA
Deputy City Attorney
MAYRA RIVERA-DELGADO
Assistant City Attorney
CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH
Attorneys for Respondents
200 Second Street
West Palm Beach, FL 33401
(561) 659-8017

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A — OPINION OF THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT DATED AND FILED OCTOBER 29, 1998

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

No. 97-5730
Non-Argument Calendar

D. C. Docket No. 95-8533-Cv-FAM

EDWARD WAGNER,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

versus

CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH, a municipal corporation, BILLY RIGGS, in his individual capacity and in his official capacity as Chief of Police, RIC L. BRADSHAW, in his individual capacity and in his official capacity as Assistant Chief of Police,

Defendants-Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Southern District of Florida

(October 29, 1998)

Before TJOFLAT, EDMONDSON and COX, Circuit Judges.

Appendix A

PER CURIAM:

Edward Wagner is a sergeant with the City of West Palm Beach Police Department ("Department"). Wagner sued Assistant Chief of Police Ric Bradshaw and Chief of Police Billy Riggs, in their individual and official capacities, and the City of West Palm Beach, challenging the Department's decision to remove Wagner from the S.W.A.T. Team ("the Team"). Wagner asserted that his removal was a violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, the Florida Constitution, and the First Amendment.[1] The district court granted summary judgment in favor of the defendants. Wagner appeals the district court's grant of summary judgment on the § 1983 First Amendment claim, which Wagner brought only against Bradshaw.[2] Wagner claims that Bradshaw removed Wagner from the S.W.A.T. Team because Wagner voiced concerns over the Team's safety.

In determining whether an employee has made out a claim for retaliation in violation of the First Amendment, this court has developed a four part test. First, the court must determine the threshold issue of whether the employee's speech constitutes a matter of public concern. *See Bryson v. City of Waycross*, 888 F.2d 1562, 1565 (11th Cir. 1989); *see also Connick v. Myers*, 461 U.S. 138, 146,

---

1. Wagner sought a remedy for the First Amendment violation pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

2. It is unclear from Wagner's complaint whether the First Amendment claim was brought against Bradshaw both individually and in his official capacity. We will assume that it was.

103 S. Ct. 1684, 1689, 75 L.Ed.2d 708 (1983). The court examines the content, form, and context of the employee's speech to determine whether it addresses a matter of public concern. *See Bryson*, 888 F.2d at 1565 (citations omitted). Second, if the speech constitutes a matter of public concern, the court applies the balancing test set out in *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563, 88 S. Ct. 1731, 20 L.Ed.2d 811 (1968), weighing the employee's First Amendment interests against the interest of the employer in providing efficient public services. *Bryson*, 888 F.2d at 1565. Third, if the employee prevails on the balancing test, the fact-finder must determine whether the employee's speech played a substantial role in the employer's adverse employment decision. *Id.* Fourth, if the employee shows that the speech was a substantial motivating factor in the decision, the burden shifts to the employer to prove that it would have reached the same decision in the absence of the protected conduct. *Id.*

As to Wagner's claims for injunctive relief and those against Bradshaw in his official capacity, for which qualified immunity is not available, the district court assumed that Wagner's speech involved a matter of public concern and held that Wagner failed to survive the second prong of the analysis — the *Pickering* balancing test. We agree with the district court that Wagner has failed to make out a claim for retaliation in violation of the First Amendment, but we need not reach the second prong of the analysis.[3] Instead,

---

3. This court may affirm the district court on any legal ground, regardless of the grounds addressed, adopted, or rejected by the district court. *See Novak v. Irwin Yacht & Marine Corp.*, 986 F.2d 468, 470 (11th Cir. 1993); *Bonanni Ship Supply, Inc. v. United States*, 959 F.2d 1558, 1561 (11th Cir. 1992).

we hold that Wagner failed to meet the threshold requirement by showing that his speech involved a matter of public concern. "To fall within the realm of [] 'public concern,' an employee's speech must 'relat[e] to a[] matter of political, social, or other concern to the community.' " *Morgan v. Ford*, 6 F.3d 750, 754 (11th Cir. 1993) (quoting *Connick v. Myers*, 461 U.S. 138, 146, 1033 S.Ct. 1684, 1690, 75 L.Ed.2d 708 (1983)). First Amendment protection is not available when the employee speaks upon "matters only of personal interest." *Id.* In determining whether the employee spoke on behalf of the public or simply as an employee on behalf of himself, the court may consider the employee's attempts to make the concerns public along with "the employee's motivation in speaking." *Id.* (citations and internal quotation omitted).

In the instant case, Wagner alleges that the Department's decision to remove him from the S.W.A.T. Team was retaliation for his having voiced concerns that the Team had practiced in a building contaminated by asbestos. Wagner voiced those concerns in a letter to the Team Captain. The letter is the only means by which Wagner voiced his concerns; he made no effort to communicate the contents of the letter to the public. Further, the language used in the letter suggests that Wagner's motivation in speaking was personal; Wagner did not purport to speak on anyone's behalf and " 'in no way dr[ew] the public at large or its concerns into the picture.' " *Id.* at 755 (quoting *Pearson v. Macon Bibb County Hosp. Auth.*, 952 F.2d 1274, 1279 (11th Cir. 1992)) (alternation in original). At most, Wagner's speech voiced the safety interests of the other S.W.A.T. team members. Wagner did

not contend that a large segment of society was at risk, or even that other members of the community, outside the S.W.A.T. Team, faced potential health risks. Because Wagner's speech was primarily in furtherance of his private interests, it does not constitute a matter of public concern.

As to Wagner's claims against Bradshaw in his individual capacity, the district court held that Bradshaw was entitled to qualified immunity because it was not clearly established at the time of Wagner's speech that it was unconstitutional to remove a S.W.A.T. Team officer for voicing concerns about safety. (R.7-140-8). However, "[a] necessary concomitant to the determination of whether the constitutional right asserted by a plaintiff is 'clearly established' at the time the defendant acted is the determination of whether the plaintiff has asserted a violation of a constitutional right at all." *Siegert v. Gilley*, 500 U.S. 226, 232, 111 S.Ct. 1789, 1793, 114 L.Ed.2d 277 (1991). In this case, because Wagner's speech does not involve a matter of public concern, it is not protected by the First Amendment. Therefore, because Wagner failed to establish the violation of a constitutional right at all, we need not reach the question of whether any right allegedly violated was "clearly established."

AFFIRMED.

APPENDIX B — ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA GRANTING DEFENDANTS' MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT DATED AND FILED SEPTEMBER 24, 1997

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA

Case No. 95-8533-CIV-MORENO

EDWARD WAGNER,

Plaintiff,

vs.

CITY OF WEST PALM BEACH, a municipal corporation, BILLY RIGGS, in his individual capacity and in his official capacity as Chief of Police, and RIC L. BRADSHAW, in his individual capacity and in his official capacity as Assistant Chief of Police,

Defendants.

ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANTS' MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

THE MATTER was referred to the Honorable William C. Turnoff, United States Magistrate Judge, for a Report and Recommendation on Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (**docket no. 96**) and Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment (**docket no. 54**). The Magistrate Judge filed a Report and Recommendation on March 19, 1997,

and recommended that Defendants' motion be granted and Plaintiff's motion be denied. After a *de novo* review of the entire record and the issues that the objections to the Magistrate Judge's Report and Recommendation present, the Court agrees with the conclusions of the Magistrate Judge and grants summary judgment in favor of the Defendants.

Background

Plaintiff is a sergeant with the City of West Palm Beach Police Department. He brings this action challenging the Department's decision to remove him from the S.W.A.T. Team on the grounds that his removal constitutes a violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act ("ADA"), the First Amendment, and the Florida Constitution.

In June 1988, Plaintiff suffered a neck injury in a duty-related car accident. In October 1989, he was selected to become a member of the City's S.W.A.T. Team. Sometime during the course of his tenure with the S.W.A.T. Team, Plaintiff sent a letter to the S.W.A.T. Team captain voicing his concerns that the S.W.A.T. Team was practicing in a building contaminated by asbestos.

On June 14, 1993, Plaintiff was notified by Defendant Ric L. Bradshaw, the Assistant Chief of Police for the City and Commander of S.W.A.T. operations, that he was being removed from the S.W.A.T. Team. A memorandum to Plaintiff from Bradshaw set forth the reasons for Plaintiff's removal:

Appendix B

> It has come to my attention in recent weeks that you appear to have problems associated with a neck injury and this old injury is causing you difficulty due to a less than violent confrontation. In addition, your memo expressing concern over hazardous environmental situations, in particular, asbestos in buildings, has caused me to be concerned about exposing you to violent situations or areas that may have adverse hazardous materials . . . .
>
> SWAT Team operations always have possible violent consequences and are physically demanding; anyone who has an easily injured neck has the potential to do additional damage and may be ineffective and a detriment to other Team members and could hamper an operation and its successful outcome.

Bradshaw further stated in his memorandum that the Plaintiff could reapply for the S.W.A.T. Team when he had corrected his existing health problems.

Shortly thereafter, Plaintiff submitted letters from two physicians to the Chief of Police, Defendant Billy Riggs, stating that Plaintiff was fit to perform unrestricted physical activity, including those activities performed by the S.W.A.T. Team. In March 1994, the Department announced that applications were being accepted for positions on the S.W.A.T. Team. Plaintiff applied but was not chosen for the Team.

Subsequently, Plaintiff asserts that he attempted to file an ADA grievance with the Police Department but was never advised that the Department had a grievance procedure. After filing a complaint with the EEOC, Plaintiff filed this action.

Plaintiff contends that his removal from the S.W.A.T. Team was the result of discrimination based on a perceived disability and in retaliation for his voiced concerns over the Team's safety. Both parties have moved for summary judgment on those claims. A hearing was held before the undersigned at which oral argument was heard.

Legal Analysis

1. ADA Claim

Plaintiff attempts to state a claim under the ADA on the grounds that he was denied a position on the S.W.A.T. Team because Defendants perceived him as having a disability. "As with real impairments, courts have held that a perceived impairment must be substantially limiting and significant." *Gordon v. E.L. Hamm & Assoc., Inc.*, 100 F.3d 907, 912 (11th Cir. 1996). The ADA regulations include "working" as a "major life activity" which, if substantially limited or regarded as substantially limited by an impairment, would qualify a person as disabled within the meaning of the ADA. 29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(i). "However, 'working' does not mean working at a particular job of that person's choice." *Wooten v. Farmland Foods*, 58 F.3d 382, 385 (8th Cir. 1995) (citations omitted). "An impairment that disqualifies a person from only a narrow range of jobs is

not considered a substantially limiting one." *Id.* (quoting *Heilweil v. Mount Sinai Hosp.*, 32 F.3d 718, 723 (2d Cir. 1994)).

Here, the Magistrate Judge correctly concluded that, even viewing all of the evidence in the light most favorable to the Plaintiff, it is clear that the Defendants viewed Plaintiff's perceived impairment as limiting only his ability to be a member of the S.W.A.T. Team. Plaintiff was allowed to remain with the Police Department as an officer. In that capacity, he may be subjected to duties as dangerous or more dangerous than those of the S.W.A.T. Team. Indeed, there is evidence that Plaintiff has excelled at this position and is next in line for promotion to Lieutenant. Clearly, the Plaintiff cannot plausibly claim that the Defendants perceived him as having a "substantially limiting" impairment, and summary judgment on Plaintiff's ADA claims in favor of the Defendants is appropriate.

Plaintiff contends that adopting the conclusion of the Magistrate Judge would effectively "stand the [ADA] on its head" because as long as the plaintiff can perform some job, he could never recover for a discriminatory adverse employment decision. The Court disagrees. The Magistrate Judge's holding does not adopt a per se rule prohibiting ADA coverage for anyone who retains the ability to do some type of work. Rather, the conclusion that this Court adopts is in keeping with the legion of case law holding that a plaintiff is not disabled under the Act simply because he cannot perform a narrow range of jobs; the Court must instead look to plaintiff's ability to perform the larger class of jobs at issue. *See, e.g.*, *McKay v. Toyota Motor Mfr.*,

110 F.3d 369, 373 (6th Cir. 1997) ("[W]e hold that the physical restrictions caused by plaintiff's disability do not significantly restrict her ability to perform the class of jobs at issue, manufacturing jobs; at best, her evidence supports a conclusion that her impairment disqualifies her from only the narrow range of assembly line manufacturing jobs . . . ."); *Dutcher v. Ingalls Shipbuilding*, 53 F.3d 723, 727 (5th Cir. 1995) (Arm impairment did not prevent plaintiff from working in the entire class of welding jobs, only those requiring substantial climbing.); *Webb v. Garelick Mfr. Co.*, 94 F.3d 484 (8th Cir. 1996) (An individual is disabled when her impairment prevents performance of a "*certain class of jobs*.") (emphasis added); *Jasany v. United States Postal Serv.*, 755 F.2d 1244 (6th Cir. 1985) (Postal employee suffering from disability that prevented him from working at a letter sorting machine was not handicapped because he could still carry out other duties at the post office.). Even defining the class of jobs at issue here as narrowly as that of "law enforcement officers," it is plain that Defendants' did not consider Plaintiff's impairment to interfere with his ability to perform. To limit the class of job as drastically as the Plaintiff suggests to "S.W.A.T. Team officers" would indeed stand the ADA on its head and blatantly ignore the settled principle that the ability to work "does not mean working at a particular job of that person's choice." *Wooten v. Farmland Foods*, 58 F.3d at 385 (8th Cir. 1995).

2. Failure to provide adequate grievance policy

Plaintiff also contends that the Defendants have discriminated against persons with disabilities by not providing adequate grievance procedures within the City's

Police Department in violation of 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.105, 35.106, 35.107. These regulations require the City to maintain a self-evaluation plan and a grievance procedure pursuant to the ADA.

Defendants offered evidence that they have had in place such procedures since 1994. Plaintiff does not dispute that such procedures are in place now, but contends that the City failed to establish such policies within the deadline established by the Department of Justice. Plaintiff argues that had such policies been timely implemented, his supervisors would have been aware of the ADA and would have been more knowledgeable in making their employment decisions.

The Court agrees with the Magistrate Judge that the Plaintiff lacks standing to bring this claim. There is no evidence that Plaintiff's injuries are fairly traceable to the City's tardiness in complying with the regulations. Plaintiff's arguments that the timely compliance with the ADA regulations would have prevented his injury are based only on speculation. In such circumstances, Plaintiff does not have standing to raise this claim. *See Allen v. Wright*, 468 U.S. 737, 751 (1984); *see also Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555 (1992).

3. First Amendment Claim

The Court further agrees with the Magistrate Judge that Plaintiff's First Amendment claim must fail as a matter of law because Defendant Bradshaw is entitled to qualified immunity. Under the doctrine of qualified immunity, a

public official performing a discretionary function enjoys qualified immunity provided that his conduct does not violate clearly established constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known. *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 800, 818 (1982). Only in exceptional cases should such knowledge can be imputed. *Lassiter v. Alabama A & M Univ.*, 28 F.3d 1146 (11th Cir. 1994).

The question for the Court then is clear: whether it clearly established in June 1993 that it was unconstitutional for the Assistant Chief of Police to remove a S.W.A.T. Team officer because of the officer's voiced concerns about safety. In answering this question, the Court is mindful of the Eleventh Circuit's instructions:

> The Supreme Court has never established a bright-line standard for determining when the State as an employer may take action adverse to an employee in response to that employee's speech. Instead, the Court has balanced the interest of the employee in commenting on matters of public concern against the interest of the employer in performing public services efficiently. *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1986) . . . . Because no bright-line standard puts the reasonable public employer on notice of a constitutional violation, the employer is entitled to immunity except in the extraordinary case where [the] *Pickering* balancing [test] would lead to the inevitable conclusion that the [adverse employment action] was unlawful.

Dartland v. Metropolitan Dade County, 866 F.2d 1321, 1323 (11th Cir. 1989). When the employer is a quasi-military organization such as the Police Department, the scales tip even more pronouncedly in favor of the employer. *Hansen v. Soldenwagner*, 19 F.3d 573, 577 (11th Cir. 1994).

Considering these principles, the Court must conclude that pre-existing law did not clearly establish that Bradshaw would have necessarily known that his actions violated Plaintiff's First Amendment rights. Plaintiff's concern with the health and welfare of the S.W.A.T. Team members is certainly a laudable one. However, the Defendant's interest in maintaining the loyalty, discipline, morale, and preparedness of the S.W.A.T. Team are equally valid. In such a case, the Court cannot conclude that the *Pickering* balancing test leads to the inevitable conclusion that Defendant Bradshaw's actions were unlawful, and Defendant Bradshaw is therefore entitled to qualified immunity.

Plaintiff's First Amendment claims for injunctive relief, however, require the Court to engage in a more detailed *Pickering* analysis, because the "qualified immunity defense has no application to . . . attempts to gain injunctive relief." *Lassiter*, 28 F.3d at 1149 n.2. The Magistrate Judged failed to address this issue in his Report and Recommendation, but the Plaintiff has raised it in his objections. Thus, the Court must determine whether the Plaintiff has made out a claim for retaliation in violation of the First Amendment.

The Eleventh Circuit has developed a four-part test for making such an evaluation. First, a court must determine

whether the government employee's speech is a matter of public concern. *Morgan v. Ford*, 6 F.3d 750, 754 (11th Cir. 1993). If so, the district court must weigh the employee's first amendment interest against the interest of the employer in providing efficient public services under the *Pickering* balancing test. *Id.* Should the employee prevail on the balancing test, the fact-finder must determine whether the employee's speech played a substantial role in the employer's adverse employment decision. *Id.* Finally, if the employee shows that the speech was a substantial motivating factor in the decision, the employer may prove by a preponderance of the evidence that it would have reached the same decision even in the absence of the protected conduct. *Id.*

Even assuming that the speech involved here involves a matter of public concern, the Plaintiff fails to survive the second prong of the analysis. As noted above, in engaging in the *Pickering* balancing, the Court is conscious of the quasi-military nature of the police department; the fact that the police unit hear was the S.W.A.T. Team further weighs in favor of the employer. As an elite unit facing especially dangerous duty, the S.W.A.T. Team's need to maintain high morale, discipline, loyalty, training, and preparedness is critical. Any threat to those goals is cause for alarm. Weighed against those interests, the Plaintiff's free speech interest seems relatively insignificant. Plaintiff was not contending, after all, that a large segment of society was at risk from asbestos contamination, only that the individual members of the S.W.A.T. Team faced such exposure. Considering that all of the S.W.A.T. Team members had volunteered for dangerous duty by applying for the

S.W.A.T. Team in the first place and could leave the Team at any time, the asbestos threat against which the Plaintiff was speaking out was minor. In short, the Court concludes as a matter of law that Defendants' interest in promoting the efficient functioning of the West Palm Beach Police Department's S.W.A.T. Team outweighs the Plaintiff's First Amendment interest in speaking out against the risk of asbestos contamination in S.W.A.T. Team training facilities. Accordingly, Plaintiff has failed to state a claim for retaliation.

4. Florida Constitutional Claims

Because the Court has granted summary final judgment in favor the Defendants as to all of Plaintiff's federal claims, it declines to exercise supplemental jurisdiction over Plaintiff's remaining state claim. Therefore, Count V of Plaintiff's Complaint is also dismissed.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated above, it is

ADJUDGED that United States Magistrate Judge William C. Turnoff's Report and Recommendation is ADOPTED. Therefore, it is

ADJUDGED that Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment is GRANTED and Plaintiff's motion for summary judgment is DENIED.

Appendix B

DONE AND ORDERED in Chambers at Miami, Florida, this 24th day of September, 1997.

s/ Federico A. Moreno
FEDERICO A. MORENO
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE